

Program Review and Investigations Committee
September 24, 2014
SCHOOL PARAPROFESSIONALS STAFFING STUDY

Senator Kissel, Representative Mushinsky and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee:

The paraeducator in a Connecticut School District can take on many roles based upon the needs of an individual student, students in a classroom as well as the demands of the individual teacher in that classroom. Who is the para? Paras comes from all economic backgrounds, often with a degree. They may have had a second profession, but have decided that this profession meets their desire to give back to their community, providing support, guidance and advocacy to students, but they often struggle in this because of a number of factors.

In today's technology driven classroom, paraeducators are not given equipment to utilize for notes, or communication with case managers. It is not uncommon for the para to purchase notebooks, folders, and utilize their own data equipment, at their own expense to keep up with the ever-changing classroom. With no laptop or tablet, it can be difficult for the para as they take handwritten notes. Today's teachers and students utilize electronic data driven classrooms with web support multiple software applications that the para must learn in real time with the students, in the classroom. Teachers meanwhile receive data training in staff meetings on a regular basis, as well as prior to the school term. Paras are not included during these training times.

The goal of providing proper training and planning for paras often takes a back seat when school budgets are factored in. While most towns receive monies earmarked for special education, school budgetary guidelines drive the para's wages. The para makes barely above minimum wage and easily fall below the federal poverty line, which is currently \$23,850 for a four person household, qualifying the para for public assistance. On average the salary of a para is \$14,800, compared to a teacher's average salary of \$50,000, or an administrator's average salary of \$100,000.

Despite all this, we do have success with our student. Let me give you an example; a para is assigned a student as a one-to-one. On the first day of school, the para discovers that the student does not know how to unbuckle his seatbelt, carry his own backpack, or un-zipper his own jacket. The student has never entered or exited a handy cap bus on his own. The student has a fear of walking down a crowded hallway. The student is afraid of noise in an assembly/ the student requires bathroom support, not knowing how to handle personal hygiene issues. The para discusses the issues and needs with the case manager. The para is told to expect little cooperation from the student as he also has behavioral issues. The para meets and confers with physical and occupational therapists monthly. It is the para who then works with the student daily. The case manager covers



multiple students and is often in a co-taught classroom. It is the para who coaches and follows through on the therapist's instructions. The para advocates for additional technology training for the students. It is the para who patiently teaches the student exercises to improve strength and coordination. The student, afraid of change resists and yells daily. Still the para committed to improving the student's education and life skills follows through with the process teaching the student to zip, button, and put on his jacket by himself. The para who guides the student down the hallway and gradually participates in assemblies. Working with speech pathologists and social workers the student is taught to have lunch in the cafeteria. The para reads out loud daily with the student to encourage verbal communication. The para works with the nurse to teach hygiene and bathroom skills.

The parents express appreciation, saying they didn't think their student could learn these skills. The para receives no bonus, no reward. The para is dedicated to improving the student's abilities. After five years, I can tell you this student is now in high school. He gets on and off the van daily by himself. He walks to all his classrooms by himself, never late. The para has worked to mirror and modify student's lessons on the student's lessons at his own grade level. The student is quite skilled with technology and navigates the internet easily and participates in out of schoolwork programs. It is an educational success story. In closing paraprofessionals are dedicated to the education of our nation's youth without any data training and limited professional development.

Paras work each day to support the needs of the individual students; however without state directives on wages, training and work conditions, we are limited in our true potential as a highly valued participant in the educational process.

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